

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS
DECEMBER 28, 2008
“A TALE OF TWO CRONES”

Let us pray: Thank you, gracious God, for these two faithful old saints, church mice, we might call them, who haunted your temple in the hope of seeing with their own eyes your long-promised Messiah, the redeemer not only of their people but of the whole world, in whose name I pray. Amen.

Some of you have heard me boast that being born in 1946 I'm at the very head of that generational cohort known, for better or worse, as the “baby-boomers.” And maybe you've noticed as my bulge in the population starts edging into retirement we're even beginning to merit a little special attention on TV — not only with ads for Viagra and the admittedly strange and sprightly musical ad for I can't remember what that shows a series of laughing and playing older women singing the song “I

want to be an old woman” —but even the final installment of the show Boston Legal—which featured William Shatner’s and James Spader’s characters being married by, of all people, Supreme Court Justice Antonio Scalia—had as its final case a successful suit brought against one of the tv networks for featuring programs aimed only at the younger demographic when we oldsters are really the ones with the most discretionary spending.

All of which is mere preliminary to my thanks to good ol’ St. Luke for including in his Gospel, as the aftermath of his Christmas story, this charming “tale of two crones” —of two old folks, senior citizens we call them—who in effect play the part of God’s appointed grandparents for the baby Jesus by welcoming him and Mary and Joseph into the temple precincts —and there bestow God’s blessing on them as they seek to remain faithful to God in doing for Jesus what the ritual of the religious law of their

people required. “A Tale of Two Crones” I call this delightful little tale that precedes the third of St. Luke’s “canticles” — the “Nunc Dimittis” — or Song of Simeon which is sung each week by our Master’s Singers as a part of the church’s service of Compline — a song we’ll be singing as our offertory, which is also often sung or spoken as a part of the funeral liturgy, the one that begins, “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your Word.” In calling this “A Tale of Two Crones” I want you to know that I checked my “Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary”, for my regular dictionary defined “crone” as “a withered old woman” but the OED came to my rescue by recognizing, as a secondary use “rarely applied to a worn-out old man.”

Being someone interested in the origins of words, as you’re all by now all too well aware, I had assumed “crone” derived somehow from the word “chronology” — the word for “time” — meaning something like

“old-timer.” But I was wrong. The word “crone” really comes from a middle Dutch word meaning “old ewe” —that is an old, female sheep. Now isn’t that more than you needed to know?

Years ago a pastor friend of mine received a Christmas card from Roland Bainton, then the long retired and much-loved Titus Street Professor of Church History at Yale Divinity School and author of Here I Stand, the most popular biography of Martin Luther in English. Mr. Bainton, as we called him, himself a crone at the time who regularly rode his bicycle up to campus, was an inveterate caricaturist who loved to sit in the refectory at YDS and sketch outrageously funny cartoons—I’ve got a couple of pretty unflattering ones of myself he drew back in the ‘70’s. At any rate, on this Christmas card that my friend received he’d sketched an ancient Simeon holding the baby Jesus in his arms and on the card had written: “*Simeon, the aged, held the baby*

Jesus, one would assume, for less than a quarter of an hour. Yet he could say that he had seen a light for revelation.” Mr. Bainton went on, “Life is so full of brief encounters. Some of you, my friends, once close I have not seen for all of sixty years. But the impact is not to be measured in length of days. Cherished memories and annual greetings are an inalienable blessing.”

Biblical scholars talk of essentially two kinds of **time** as understood in Scripture. The first, “*chronos*” from which, as I say, “*crone*” does not derive, is the time measured by a clock or a calendar—or I suppose a sun-dial in the old days—linear time that is measured in seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, centuries, millennia, and so forth.

But there’s another kind of time in the Bible called “*kairos*” which means a “special moment” or a “crisis in time” meaning a “turning point in time” perhaps,

what we sometimes call in fancy, redundant language a “kairotic” moment.

Today’s “tale of two crones” is certainly an example of a “kairos” moment in the life of Simeon and Anna. For both of these old codgers, we’re led to believe, were waiting for just this brief, shining moment—this epiphany or revelation of God’s long-promised goodness to Israel. And in a Spirit-guided moment of “co-incidence,” a gift of grace that I always find fascinating, Simeon, Luke says, “*came into the temple*” and Anna, Luke says, “*at that moment came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem*” — at that “very moment” — the “right moment” — the “kairotic time” — even though Luke bothers to tell us that this kairotic moment occurred toward the end of a whole life-time — clocktime — of 84 years, years when, Luke says perhaps in a bit of exaggeration, “*she never left the temple but worshiped*

there with fasting and prayer night and day.”

This is a reminder to us — of which, sadly, we Christians often seem to need to be reminded — that Jesus not only was a Jew but was brought up, as Luke underlines in this story, by pious, religiously observant Jewish parents of whom Luke writes, “*When they had finished **everything required by the law of the Lord**, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.*” And today’s reading ends on this note, “*The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.*” A statement that is followed, beyond today’s text, with the only story of Jesus’ boyhood we have in the Bible, the equally charming tale of his visit to Jerusalem with his parents who journeyed there to observe the Passover and who somehow managed to lose the 12 year old Jesus on the way home, only to discover to their great relief, we can

imagine, him sitting in the temple itself among the rabbis in deep conversation.

These are stories that underline the Jewishness of Jesus and how Jesus grew up a “good Jewish boy,” one who knew the traditions and teachings of his people and their religion well enough to become his own authority in matters of the law, as we see in the rest of the Gospel accounts of his life and ministry.

But here at the beginning of Jesus’ life it’s important for us to know that Jesus was brought up in a traditional if poor Jewish family. We know it was poor because in today’s text Luke reports that their temple offering as “a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord” was “a pair or turtledoves or two young pigeons.” But according to the law in Leviticus 12:6 a woman’s so called “purification” sacrifice was to be year-old lamb as a burnt offering and a pigeon or turtledove for a sin offering unless she could not afford a lamb when two

birds would suffice. And so Mary and Joseph must have counted themselves among the “anawim” — the poor of the land. And, of course, this assumption had already been implicit in Mary’s own song, the Canticle we call “Magnificat” which we sang last Sunday in which Mary sings of how God has “*looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant... bringing down the powerful from their thrones, lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things.*” Mary and Joseph, Luke wants us to know, were among the “pious poor” of God’s people — for whom Jesus would express profound concern throughout his life and ministry.

One last dimension of today’s text that accompanies if not intrudes upon today’s shining moment of *kairos* for which our two old crones had waited so long and patiently is adumbrated in Simeon’s prophecy. For after taking the baby Jesus in his arms and speaking the words of the *Nunc Dimittis*,

Luke says, *“the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.”* And Luke adds, *“Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary”* what must have struck her as very odd and troubling words to consider as words of blessing: *“This child,”* Simeon declared puzzlingly and portentously as a prophet’s words often were, *“is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”*

Whatever Mary might have taken these words to mean, we can’t help but hear them without flashing forward to the scene of Jesus’ crucifixion and those numerous artists’ renderings of Mary weeping at the death of her son—maybe best portrayed in Michelangelo’s sculpture “Pieta.” And so heartbreak and pain will also be part of Jesus’ and Mary’s destiny—as well as all of

us who would follow Jesus in the way of the cross.

Simeon's words function as a kind of Lenten cloud passing over the gleaming star of Christmas intruding into the joy of our celebrating Jesus' birth. But this is, after all, the child, as the prophetess Anna enthused, for whom "*all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem*" were awaiting in hope and expectation—a redemption that would cost this very child his life's blood.

And yet our charming if troubling story of the aftermath of Christmas involving two old crones ends on this positive note that reminds us that the destiny of the newborn Jesus is safe in God's hands. For as Luke says, "*The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor--the charis in Greek which also means "grace"-- of God was upon him.*"

A grace-filled Christmas be yours.
Amen